

BIBLICAL CRITERIA IN MODERN DANCE

BY

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Theologian Paul Tillich advanced the discussion of "Theology and the Arts" by noting that some art is strongly religious in style even though it is not religious in subject matter; and conversely, some art is not religious in style even though it is religious in subject matter. Similarly, some sermons and writings cite many Biblical passages but are essentially unexpressive of Biblical faiths (in so far as they uphold the status quo without justice for many individuals); while other sermons and writings cite few if any Biblical passages but express Biblical faiths (in so far as they call into question the status quo and seek justice for each human life). To date, most discussions of the Bible in dance have focused on works which are Biblical in subject matter such as "The Prodigal Son" or "Job". (1) This paper focuses on the less obvious but profound reflection of Biblical faith and values in the aesthetics of modern dance technique and choreography.

"Religion and Art" analysis in the visual arts has proceeded further than such analysis in dance and therefore may aid dance criticism as we consider the question of Biblical criteria. Tillich has drawn our attention to how the very style of art expresses theology. Our preoccupation with iconography in visual art or with subject matter in dance tends to reduce visual art or dance to narrative or literature; but attention to style considers each art form in its own terms and allows its unique contributions to inform us. Tillich distinguished between religion in the larger sense ("being ultimately concerned about one's own being, about one's self and one's world, about its meaning and its estrangement and its finitude") and religion in the narrower sense ("having a set of symbols, . . . divine beings, . . . ritual actions and doctrinal formulations about their relationship to us"). (2) The larger sense of religion is communicated in style and the narrower sense is communicated through subject matter.

Thus he was able to distinguish four categories of relation between religion and visual art. The first is that of a style expressive of no ultimate concern and a content without religious subject matter. The second is that of religious in style and non-religious in content. As an example of this second category, Tillich cites Picaso's "Guernica", because it is a painting in which "we do not cover up anything, but have to look at the human situation in its depths". (3) The third category is that of non-religious style but obviously religious content, as in the case of Raphael's "Madonna and Child" series or "Crucifixion". The symbols in these paintings are obviously religious; but so harmonious and well rounded is the style that it denies the content and makes the paintings "dangerously irreligious". Tillich sees paintings of this kind as dangerous because, for example, Raphael's Christ on the cross reveals no dimension of suffering and so may mislead the viewer to expect an easy harmony with humanity as the goal or result of God's presence, an expectation that will blind the viewer to God's presence in much of life. The fourth category is that in which we find both religious style and religious content. Tillich's prime example for the fourth category is Grunewald's sixteenth century "Crucifixion" on the Isenheim altar where the style as well as content expresses crucifixion.

He is uneasy about identifying any contemporary visual art on this level.

Tillich's four categories are thought provoking when considered in relation to modern dance. In the first category, that of a work whose style shows no ultimate concern and whose subject matter is not religious, we would place many student dance compositions of the Cunningham genre. The

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1. Most recently Giora Manor's "The Bible As Dance", *Dance Magazine* (December 1978), pp. 56-86.
 2. Paul Tillich, "Existential Aspects of Modern Art", *Christianity and the Existentialists*, Carl Michelson, ed., Scribner's Sons, New York, 1956, p. 132.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

second grouping characterized by religious style and non-religious subject matter would include Kurt Joos' "Green Table", Anna Sakalow's "Rooms", Paul Taylor's "Cloven Kingdom" and "Esplanade", Jose Limon's "The Moor's Pavane", and Twyla Tharp's "Sue's Leg" to name only a very few. In the third category, we would place many of the so-called "religious" and "Biblical" dances we have seen. Many of these dances, while their content is specifically religious, display a non-religious style: i.e. a style which is primarily smooth, pretty, and entertaining, free of serious conflict and certain of a happy ending. Norbert Vesak's "Gift to be Simple", a ballet about American Shakers, falls for us into this third category. In the fourth category, that of dances with both religious style and religious content, we would place Margalit Oved's "Mothers of Israel", Helen Tamiris' "Negro Spirituals", and Martha Graham's "Seraphic Dialogue", Jose Limon's "Exiles" and Paul Sanasardo's "Abandoned Prayer".

It is the second category which radically expands our understanding of the Bible in dance, as we begin to explore Tillich's observation that the very style or form of an art work may be Biblical whether or not its subject matter is Biblical.

One may perceptively see that when Tillich speaks of "religious" style he has in mind the style of Biblical faiths as prophetic. One may argue some other religions are not predominantly prophetic in style but are largely priestly in style. For distinctions between prophetic and priestly styles, see the bottom of page 5. Although Old and New Testaments have some priestly elements, they are predominantly prophetic.

The reason for this is that there is in modern dance technique and choreography a prophetic element which parallels the prophetic element in the Biblical narrative.

The prophetic is iconoclastic towards any standing order; for the prophet sees the limits of that order and would stretch such limits to include those left out and reform those within. The Smithsonian's director of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Joshua Taylor, has seen a parallel of the prophetic in an art style he calls "will to fellowship"

or "communitive"; for such art makes me aware of individual persons and our relationships. Figurative or not in subject matter, the work's painterly style (e.g. van Gogh) makes me aware that a person with a body made that and makes me aware of myself as a distinct bodily individual that can relate with others but never totally become one. In contrast, the priestly is styled a "will to form" and "unitive" (e.g. classical or neo-classical works) that make me oblivious to persons as I am drawn beyond into perfect art styles are religious; but they correspond to different religions: "unitive" corresponds to eastern religions with major concern for unity with eternal ideals and absorption into immortality of the soul where all are one; but "communitive" corresponds to western religions with major concern for community among persons and resurrection of the body with each individual persisting as a distinct part in the world. Doug Adams, "Insights From Three Perspectives On The Religious and Aesthetic Imagination", *Seedbed* (Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture), III, No. 3, June 1975, pp. 1-3.

The first obvious question raised by this thesis is an important one. Because the modern dance is such a diverse phenomenon in terms of style, technique, and choreographic intention, is it even possible to speak of a basic modern dance aesthetic? Selma Jean Cohen states, in her Introduction to *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, "The modern dance is always concerned with the unacceptable symbol, the one that startles us into awareness. The pressure may be subtle or it may be obvious, but it is always there."⁶ The modern dance, then, can be seen as a prophetic attitude toward the function of art in general, and dance in particular, in the contemporary world. The basic modern dance aesthetic is a prophetic point of view.

Biblical prophetic is defined by Abraham Heschel: "The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome."⁷ The prophet's language, poetry, and action is charged with agitation, anguish, and a spirit of nonacceptance.⁸ The prophet "is a preacher whose purpose is not self-expression or the purgation of feeling, but communication."⁹

6. Selma Jean Cohen, *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1965, p. 14.
7. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper and Row, New York, 1969, p. 10.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

John Martin, *New York Times* dance critic, elaborated in 1933 that the modern dance was not dance for spectacular display or self-expression, but dance which attempted to communicate personal authentic experience, experience connected with a basic truth about human beings and reality.(10) Modern dance began as a prophetic form in that its purpose was the communication of personal authentic experience by means of new symbols, new forms, and new ways of moving. It called into question both the dance that had gone before and the time and place in which it found itself.

Perhaps the modern dance of the 1920's, 30's, and 40's shows the basically prophetic character of the form more clearly than the dance of the 50's, 60's and early 70's. For the early choreographers (Graham, Humphrey, and Wigman), emotional motivation and human communication about human beings was primary. These choreographers believed in the potential social relevance of art, art rooted like the Biblical narrative in time and space. They saw the ordinary experience of real human beings as valid artistic material out of which the artist may create. They were concerned with meaning in all its dimensions; and like Biblical characters and stories, they saw no necessity for happy endings. (Moses never made it to the promised land; (Deut. 34:4) and the elder brother in Jesus' parable does not go to the party. (Luke 15:28)) While the earlier choreographers saw that dance could be communicative in itself apart from narrative or representational content, they were always concerned with form as the shape of content, rather than simply as an end in itself. As Heschel reminds us, the prophet's central concern is "the plight of man . . . God Himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man, rather than as contemplating eternal ideas."(11) The early modern dances, including Graham, Wigman, and Humphrey did not merely contemplate eternal ideas. These choreographers looked at human beings in human situations and told the brusque, undecorated, unlovely truth as they saw it.

Those choreographers offered us dances which lift up the ambiguity, the humor, the sorrow, the absurdity (and through these realities the truth) to be found in ordinary human experience. This lifting up of things as they are is part of the prophetic voice and potential Biblical touchstone within modern dance. Confronted with one of these early dances (one thinks among others of Joos' "Green

Table", Graham's "Lamentation" and her dances based on Greek myths and Wigman's "Witch Dance".) the audience has the opportunity to see some part of themselves as they really are, to hear some part of the truth about how it is to be a human being.

Heschel states that though the prophet begins with a message of hope.(12) As the modern dance and its choreographers grew, they also developed the counterpoint side of their prophetic form. The prophetic message has a tenderness at its heart, what Heschel calls the pathos of God.(13) Repent so that the crooked may be made straight, so that the barren places may bear fruit, so that Jacob may stand, for he is very small. Dances which come immediately to mind are Humphrey's "Day On Earth", Graham's "Appalachian Spring", and Charles Weidmann's "On My Mother's Side".

While in that earlier period modern dancers shared many of the above mentioned principles of belief, this is less true today. Perhaps the major change since 1950 has been the lessening importance of emotional motivation and communication of universal human experience. Form has taken precedence over content. The early creators found new forms in order to communicate new content. Graham found the genesis of movement in the act of breathing, the source of human life, beginning as the Biblical narrative begins with the gift of breath to the human body, and its consequences. She used this new discovery to communicate human experience, turning away from the lovely exoticism of the Denishown school.

As non-Western religions and their corresponding aesthetics permeate Western culture, one sees a shift in modern dance style as reflected in the work of Erick Hawkins. Hawkins states that the function of the artist is not to present life as it is; but in line with traditional Oriental aesthetics, to offer ideals of enlightenment, life as it ought to be.(14) This is directly counter to the Biblically prophetic understanding that renewal or enlightenment is to be found in the midst of life as it is in all its grubbiness and ambiguity, that God is at least as likely to be encountered through the experience of being invaded by the Assyrian army as in meditation in the temple.

10. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

11. Heschel, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

14. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Other choreographers (e.g. Alwin Nikolais and Merce Cunningham) have turned to theatricality and almost exclusively to form itself as basic artistic concerns. This is a potentially prophetic direction, as witnessed by Tillich's second category of art with religious style but non-religious content. However, a requirement for the prophetic whether in the Biblical narrative or in modern dance is that it calls us and our favorite attitudes and assumptions into question. Insofar as choreographers have simply acknowledged the inescapableness of contemporary forces of abstraction, randomness, mechanization, and meaninglessness, they have ceased to be prophetic. The prophetic is that which speaks the new word and calls us beyond what is. The prophetic transcends the contemporary and is allied with a yet unrealized future. Insofar as modern dance or any art simply reflects or reiterates the beliefs and tendencies and statements of the surrounding culture, it ceases to be prophetic. The prophetic art form grows out of its time and place but also calls its time and place into question offering a clearer and deeper vision — lest the people perish.

In the work of the new choreographers of the 1970's, such as Twyla Tharp, Meredith Monk, Pilobolus, and Kei Takei, there seems to be some return to a concern with emotional motivation and the importance of human experience, although the result looks utterly different than the works of Graham, Humphrey, Limon, Weidmann, et.al. There is a new wedding of emotional motivation and abstraction of form in dances which are religious in style by suggesting realities and concerns below the surface of human life. In these works the modern dance seems to be reemerging as a prophetic art form in our time and place,

In retrospect, we see that dances which have struck us in the past as prophetic have certain technical elements in evidence that stress realities of human life as we live it: use of percussive movement, the center body, fall and recovery, the floor, asymmetry, humor . . . Such elements have been used to create dances that have surprised us and struck us as new; and they have required us to look again more closely and have stretched our vision. Similarly, the Biblically prophetic challenges us to hear the new song, taste the new wine; for repeating what used to be prophetic will no longer be prophetic. John Cage helps us understand why this is the case. He notes that the American flag is radically asym-

metrical in design; but we have seen it so often that it has become for us symmetrical and visually undisturbing we do not really look at it any more.

Paul Taylor, although not a new choreographer, is a master at making prophetic dances which force us to look again at ourselves and our lives. One such dance is "Cloven Kingdom". As the piece begins, men and women in evening dress gather and dance. We see what we expect to see on such an occasion: glamor, sophistication, courtesy, flirtation. But Taylor paints his glittering urbane picture in order to spasmodically peel it away so that we see into a more subconscious, basic, humorous, and all too recognizable reality.

So quickly that we are not sure whether we really saw it or only imagined it, a dancer breaks the smooth sequence to make a shambling animal-like movement toward another dancer. Just as quickly the original sequence is resumed as though it had never been broken. As the piece develops, the animal-like qualities of the apparent sophisticates emerge more completely. The dominant movement themes are now based on animal movement, which contrasts pointedly with the evening dresses and tailcoats of the dancers.

Cloven Kingdom is a Biblically prophetic dance, although it has no Biblical characters or religious subject matter. It is Biblical prophetic because of its style, fitting the second category in Tillich's religion and art analysis. Not only does its title echo the basic human predicament; human beings are formed, as the Bible puts it, from the dust of the earth and the breath of God (Gen. 2:7) so that to be a person is by definition to inhabit a cloven kingdom. The dance is prophetic also because it forces us to look beneath the surface of our lives and our interactions with others, and to meet and recognize our shadow selves. Taylor, urbanely and with humor, calls into question some of our favorite assumptions about ourselves: that we are basically quite nice, civilized, courteous, and sophisticated creatures. He suggests to us that the wearing of tail-coats may be more appropriate than we realize.

New prophetic dances use movement elements in unexpected, newly prophetic ways as we see in Twyla Tharp's "Sue's Leg". Although all dancers try for a flow of movement, Tharp achieves it to a unique degree in "Sue's Leg".

15. John Cage, "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas", reprinted in Alan Solomon, *Jasper Johns, Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture, 1954-1965*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1964, pp. 27-28.

She uses an extraordinary flow of movement in the dancers' bodies, together with humor, to recreate the social dance and popular music world of the 1930's and 40's. The movement never stops; it flows through individual bodies, and from body to body, without visible drops or dead spots. The dancers meet, cling together, bounce and roll off each other, giving and receiving energy from each other's flow of movement. And when body contact occurs between dancers it is not for the purpose of spectacular lifts or other technical fireworks, but to show us real bodies: excited, moving, playing exhausted. Her use of humor also allows the audience to perceive a sense of community (a sense of we are all in this together) among the dancers. We see potential couples eye each other, try each other; we see them both succeed and fail at dancing together; and we see them both serious and absurd. And, like us, they keep on dancing, stepping on each other's feet, and squeezing the last drop of life out of an era and out of themselves.

"Sue's Leg", like "Cloven Kingdom" is a prophetic dance with secular subject matter. It is prophetic in showing us human beings not only as they were but as they are. Tharp's dances have been called merely fashionable, chic, and slick by some critics. But in this particular work, whether she

intended to do so or not she has shown us something of "the plight of man", to use Heschel's words. Watching "Sue's Leg" and listening to its music, one begins to remember that those people moving frenetically, throwing each other into the air, clinging together in the last hours of dance marathons, were people on the brink of war and in the midst of war. Their dances came out of the heart of "the plight of man". As we watch them, recreated by Tharp, we are in our time and in the midst of our own wars, reminded of our own plight.

A prophetic modern dance whether religious in subject matter or not tells us the truth: not necessarily particular truths (that the Prodigal Son came home or did not, or that Job made his peace with God or did not) but some part of the truth about ourselves. A prophetic modern dance tells us something about how it is to be a human being. Any particular truth, any particular message is soon stated. But the truth about ourselves can never be told fully or too often. Biblically prophetic art is made by an iconoclast, by artists who break the holy images to startle us into new awareness of the truth about ourselves. Confronted with such a work of art, we once again have ears to hear and eyes to see; and miraculously, for a moment, we do hear, and we do see. □

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